

PSALM 87

A SONG RARELY SUNG

Ronald B. Allen

The first, article in this series sought to set the stage for the importance of walking along pathways in Scripture that are rarely traversed. These walks may be taken for two reasons. One is the sheer joy of marking out new territory. The second is the divine duty of making these texts our own familiar friends, lest they be lost to us, and to our posterity, merely from misuse and disinterest.

Among the hymns of ancient Israel that used to be sung in temple worship, Psalm 87 has experienced a peculiar fate in the worship of the church. The words of John Newton's great hymn "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" have been drawn from` this ancient psalm.

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken
Formed thee for His own abode.

However, the biblical poem on which this worthy hymn is based remains among the most enigmatic of Israel's ancient temple songs. The classic hymn is still being sung, but the ancient, biblical poem is all but, unknown.

When one reads through Psalm 87, the reason for its lack of familiarity becomes clear; it seems to be nearly unintelligible. ." The first time I spoke from this psalm was in a church in a small town in Oregon. I noticed in the morning bulletin that the Scrip-

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ture passage was to be read by one of the men in the church. I watched him walk up to the platform in polished, highly tooled leather boots. I saw the western cut of his shirt and sport coat and saw his Marlboro-man visage--and I feared the worst. I know that the soul of a poet may be found in even the most rugged of men, but the situation did not look good. I realized too late that I should have requested that another passage be read as the morning Scripture rather than this difficult psalm.

But there he was. He looked down at me and then down at his Bible. Then he said something like this: "Howdy, folks. I read over this psalm twice last night. It didn't mean a thing then. I read it this morning and it still don't mean a thing. Well, you listen and see." Then he read the psalm. He looked out at me and then to the congregation and said, "See what I mean? It still don't mean a thing." Then he went and sat down.

I was a bit shaken, but as I walked to the pulpit, I thought this man had actually set things up quite well in developing a level of interest. It was just that I would have to deliver, or else. Psalm 87 is a truly marvelous poem, but it presents problems of several sorts. First, it shows an unusual compactness of expression. Poetry is generally marked by an economy of words, but this psalm has an unusual brevity, even an abruptness in its treatment.¹ Second, the poem draws on literary and theological imagery that may not be readily apparent to modern readers. Third, the poem relies on a concept that is truly unexpected, the literary device of a divine visitation amid God's people.

1. His foundation is in the holy mountains.
2. The LORD loves the gates of Zion
More than all the dwellings of Jacob.
3. Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God! Selah
4. "I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who
know Me;
Behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia:
"This one was born there.'"
5. And of Zion it will be said,
"This one and that one were born in her;
And the Most High Himself shall establish her."
6. The LORD will record,
When He registers the peoples:
"This one was born there." Selah

¹ Artur Weiser writes, "The language of the poet is anything but flowing. He molds his brief sentences in such a daring and abrupt manner that only a few characteristic features are thrown into bold relief while their inner connection is left in the dark" (The Psalms: A Commentary, Old Testament Library [London: SCM, 1959], 579-80).

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7. Both the singers and the players on instruments say,
"All my springs are in you."²

Psalm 87 has three strophes or poetic movements of unequal length; the first two are indicated by the term "Selah" at the end of verses 3 and 6. The first strophe presents an affirmation of Yahweh's impassioned love for Zion (vv. 1-3). The second strophe reports on Yahweh's pleasure in the peoples of Zion (vv. 4-6). The third strophe exults in Yahweh's determination in Zion (v. 7).

YAHWEH'S LOVE FOR ZION IS IMPASSIONED (VV. 1-3)

The first verse presents an example of the terseness that marks this psalm. Literally the verse reads, "His foundation . . . in mountains of holiness." The term "His foundation" has no antecedent, there is no verb, and the plural form of the term "mountains" is problematic.³ But the point is clear: God has made His place in Jerusalem. Why would the eternal, infinite God find such importance in a mere place among the hills of faraway Judah? And even if we knew the answer, some might ask, Of what importance is that today?

Verse 2 is even more striking, speaking as it does of the ongoing love (the verb is an active participle) that Yahweh has for Zion's gates that exceeds His love for Jacob's dwellings. Indeed, three objects of God's love are given in this section of the poem. One is His love for the dwellings of Jacob. Another, which is implied, is for Zion itself. And the third and greatest love is for the gates of Zion. We can think thoughts after the psalmist by enumerating each of these three items: the dwellings of Jacob, the city Zion, and the gates of Zion.

The dwellings of Jacob suggest not merely homes scattered about the land of Israel, but fulfillment of the divine promise to the ancients that the people of Abraham through Isaac would one day enjoy the benefits of life in the land of God's blessing.

When the ancient pagan diviner Balaam⁴ looked at the encampment of Israel, the Spirit of God caused him to acknowledge that he was not looking at merely another nation. He saw that Is-

² Unless otherwise noted, English quotations are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

³ Grammatical and syntactical issues are discussed in more detail in Willem A. VanGemeren, "The Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and Richard P. Polcyn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:561-64.

⁴ My argument that Balaam was a pagan diviner is developed in my essay, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. Paul Feinberg and John Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 79-119.

rael was distinguished from among the nations: "For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num. 23:9).

The phrase "all the dwellings of Jacob" in Psalm 87:2 may be a poetic extension of that earlier observation. The tone of this psalm is affirmative, even idealistic. God had established Israel as a nation apart from all other nations, dwelling exclusively for Him as His people in His land. This picture of Yahweh's redeemed people, living in communion with Him, enjoying life in the land He gave them forms what Martens calls "God's design."⁵

Thus this passage affirms Yahweh's love for the dwellings of Jacob, in direct fulfillment of His promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:18-21; 17:8).

The second affirmation of Yahweh's love in the passage is implied; this is for Zion. The word "Zion" is used by the poets in the Bible to describe the city of Jerusalem in a most endearing manner. This word is part of the widespread literary figure that Jerusalem is Yahweh's beloved "daughter." The phrase "daughter of Zion" (e.g., Isa. 10:32; 62:11; Zeph. 3:14) is a misleading translation. Readers may think the poet was speaking of Zion having a daughter. Actually, however, Zion is the daughter, so the phrase should be translated "'Daughter Zion."⁶ As God has a "son" in the people of Israel (Exod. 4:22), so He has a "daughter" in the city of Jerusalem. When the poets of the Bible used the term "Zion" they were speaking of Jerusalem in the most endearing of ways.

Why did God affirm His love for Zion's gates? Ancient cities in Canaan and Israel were built for defense against invaders. Cities were often built on high hills near roads, water, and arable land. These four factors—height, roads, water, and farmland—would figure again and again in decisions of ancient peoples to rebuild on sites that previously had been destroyed by wars with enemies or calamities of nature.

These wooden barriers., even when equipped with iron fittings, were the weak points of the city. For this reason the ancient engineers designed imposing towers and complex structures to

⁵ Martens develops his excellent approach first from Exodus 5:22-6:8 (Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], esp. 17-30). "It is the thesis of this book," he writes, "that the fourfold design described in Exodus 5:22-6:8 is an appropriate and also adequate grid according to which to present the whole of the Old Testament material" (ibid., 27).

⁶ This is an appositional genitive. See Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 11, sec. 42.

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protect these gates from fire, hacking instruments, and battering rams. So one might ask, Are these massive, complex structures that surround the gates and protect the city serving as the focus of God's love in this passage? No, it is the gates themselves.

In the gates there is something more important to God, more loved by Him, than even the realization of His design for Israel. Gates were used not just to keep invading armies and wandering brigands from entering the city; the gates were also the means for rightful people to enter. They were the means of access to the city. The gates made it possible for people to come near to God.

There is thus a profound progression in verse 2. God loves the dwellings of Jacob, for this was the realization of His purpose to bring His people to His land. God loves Jerusalem; indeed, Zion is His dear "daughter." But God has an even greater love for Zion's gates, because the gates allow people to come near to Him in holy worship. God is ever seeking true worshipers (John 4:23).

The beauty of the words of Psalm 87:3 is inescapable in standard translations, despite a grammatical difficulty in the Hebrew text. These are the words: "Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God!"⁷ The second movement of the psalm (vv. 4-6) identifies those glories and why they are spoken. The glories are the assertions concerning the work of the living God in bringing about the new birth of peoples of the nations who have come to Zion through its open gates to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The phrase "O city of God" uses the definite article with the Hebrew term "God." This word **הָאֱלֹהִים** has the distinctive use of the article, meaning "genuine deity."⁸ That is, there is something important in the notion that Zion is the city of the true God. Christian readers appreciate Yahweh's inordinate love for Jerusalem not only because they know this was the site of the ancient temple of God, but also because it was in Zion, in Jerusalem, that the Lord Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead.

⁷ The problem is that the term "glorious things" is plural and the participle is singular. Should we read, "Glories is spoken of you"? Some emend the passive (Pual) participle to the active (Piel) with God as subject, "He [the Lord] speaks glories of you." But it may be possible to leave the difficult Hebrew phrasing as it is and to understand this as an example of an implied, impersonal subject: "He is they are / speaking glorious things of you." This implied, impersonal subject may be taken as a plural, "wonderful things they tell of you." This is the view of Hans-Joachim Kraus, cited by VanGemeren, "The Psalms," 563, n. 3. Williams speaks of passive, impersonal constructions in which the apparent object is really the subject and follows the verb without concord (*Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 13, item 59); but his examples are of the determinative accusative, marked by the "sign" of the definite direct object. Genesis 27:42 serves as an example. Perhaps Psalm 87:3, in poetry, intentionally omits the sign of the definite direct object before the accusative.

⁸ See Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 19, item 88.

YAHWEH'S PLEASURE IN ZION IS UNEXPECTED (VV. 4-6)

This second movement of the poem includes quotation marks, and a new speaker, the Lord Himself, is presented. This marvelous verse suggests an epiphany of the sovereign Lord among His people.

In August 1993 I was with a group of three hundred cyclists on a five-hundred-mile ride across Oregon. We began in the mountains east of Pendleton and made our way west along secondary roads and through small towns until we reached the Pacific coast. The most memorable event in our journey occurred near the end of our first day's ride. We had been riding for about seventy miles on a glorious, warm day. Suddenly I was aware of a number of cars moving along our road, which had seen very little traffic; among the cars passing us 'were a number of sheriff vehicles. I signaled one deputy to roll down his window. I shouted, "What's going on?" He shouted back, "The wagons are coming!"

The wagons! We knew about a reenactment of the founding of the Oregon Trail on this sesquicentennial anniversary year. A train of authentically recreated wagons was retracing the journey that had first been taken in 1843. But we had no idea that our route of cycling would intersect that afternoon with the route of the wagon train. Most of the riders I was with went on to the camp, but one rider and I decided to wait and meet the wagons. We chained our bicycles to a fence post and scrambled up a hillside to meet with our past. Along the way we actually walked on wagon ruts that were 150 years old; so many wagons with such heavy loads had compacted the earth so soundly, that despite generations of tilling, the ruts were still visible.

High up on the hillside we sat down, waiting and looking eastward up the hill. At last we heard some sounds, clanking and hoofs, murmured voices and muffled sounds. Then there was the rise of a cloud of dust. We saw the ears, then the heads of the horses of the lead riders, then the riders, and at last, the wagons. It was an epiphany of the grand history of the American West. It was a moment of sheer magic. Tears came down our cheeks. Like excited children, we started running to meet the horses and wagons, and we ran along with them as they descended the hill. I remember one cowboy shouting, "Get those bicycle riders out of the way; they will scare the horses!"

We experienced a "visitation" from the past, a reenactment of Western history that had now become "our history." Though none of my ancestors came across the West on the Oregon Trail, this history was now mine, because it is the shared history of the American people.

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Psalm 87 presents an epiphany that transcends wagons from the old West crossing an Oregon hillside. This psalm displays a stunning picture of a divine visitation. Here the Lord of glory came down to visit His people as they were worshiping in His temple. But the surprise of this psalm does not end with the divine visitation. The psalm records the grand notion that God Himself was in a manner of speaking, "taken back" at the peoples who were present to worship His name.

From time to time the Bible uses poetic language that has an almost childlike naivete with reference to God's interaction with mankind. The Hebrew word often used to describe this "intersection" of God with mankind is **בָּקַרְבָּן**, "to visit." Since God is not limited by space or time, the use of the verb **בָּקַרְבָּן** with God as the subject is a condescension to finite understanding. It is a way of indicating a more immediate sense of God's presence. For example, when God brought about the completion of His promise to Abraham and Sarah so that the two of them in their advanced ages might finally become the parents of the child of promise, Genesis reads, "And the Lord visited [**בָּקַרְבָּן**] Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken" (21:1).

At other times the idea of a divine visitation may be in view, even without the verb **בָּקַרְבָּן**. Genesis 6 describes God's evaluation of the utter sinfulness of mankind that led to His overwhelming judgment in the great Flood. "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (v. 5) and "so God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt" (v. 12). That is, without using the verb **בָּקַרְבָּן** Genesis 6 indicates that God came near, in a sense, for a "visit" to observe mankind's profound wickedness.⁹

A key to understanding Psalm 87 is to identify the speaker in verse 4. A comparison with the wording of verses 5-6 leads to the conclusion that the speaker is none other than the Lord. That is, Psalm 87 presents Yahweh visiting His people at worship in His temple in Jerusalem. Delitzsch wrote of this stunning intrusion of God into the psalm. "Jahve [Yahweh] Himself takes up the discourse, and declares the gracious, glorious, world-wide mission of His chosen and beloved city: it shall become the birthplace of all nations."¹⁰ Whereas in Genesis 6 Yahweh came down to observe wickedness among mankind leading to overwhelming judgment, the divine visitation in Psalm 87 depicts righteousness leading to further divine blessing.

⁹ Psalms 14:2-3 and 53:2-3 refer to a similar divine investigation of the wickedness of mankind.

¹⁰ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, 3 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 3:18-19.

The pictorial language of this psalm provides an example of an irruption of the presence of God among His people.¹¹ Though God is everywhere, there is still the concept of a more immediate sense of His presence in theophany, epiphany, and irruption.

In a lovely poetic manner this poem presents Yahweh coming to His temple to observe the congregation gathered to worship Him in Jerusalem. In the process He "discovered" something to which He responded with mock incredulity and divine joy.

What He observed is a multinational congregation in the Jerusalem temple. This is simply wondrous. All through the Old Testament period foreign nationals were being attracted to worship the living God, especially during the reigns of Solomon and Hezekiah. The times of peace, of a flourishing economy, of periods of religious vitality—these were times of great evangelism among foreign peoples in biblical times.¹²

The list includes Rahab, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia. Rahab is not the redeemed woman from Jericho. Her name was רַחַב. But the Rahab in Psalm 87:4 is רַחַב,¹³ one of the scriptural terms for a "dragon," similar to the terms "Leviathan" and תַּנִּינִי (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). This is not the place to recount the use the poets of the Bible make of dragon imagery, except to say that this imagery, drawn in part from Ugaritic mythic poetry, was used as the classic put-down of the Egyptians whom God destroyed at the climax of the Exodus (Exod. 14-15). Since Yahweh had defeated Egypt by the use of water, the poets of the Bible liked to call old Egypt "that dragon" (e.g., Isa. 30:7), in a mocking, derisive contempt for a people who had dared to stand against the living God.

But here is the wonder: The term רַחַב, "the dragon people," is used here of those who have come to worship the Lord. That is, this psalm turns the joke on its head. Some of the worshipers of God in Jerusalem had come from what formerly had been an enemy nation, a nation that had been derided by Israel's poets. Yet, there they were, the "dragon people" amid the Hebrew worshipers!

Among them were also people from Babylon, the proverbial seat of apostasy (Gen. 11:1-9). [If one wanted to convey the concept of idolatry briefly, all he need do was to say the word "Babylon."]

¹¹ "Eruption" refers to a blowing out from within, as in a volcano, whereas "irruption" is the breaking into from without, as in God's action.

¹² George M. Peters's presentation of centripetal force in world missions in the time of the Hebrew Scriptures is fascinating (A Biblical Theology of Missions [Chicago: Moody, 1972]).

¹³ Ronald B. Allen, "The Leviathan, Rahab, Dragon Motif in the Old Testament" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968).

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Even in the New Testament the ultimate expression of idolatry is described as "Babylon the great harlot" (Rev. 17:1-6). But people from Babylon were there in the Lord's temple, adoring Him.

They were joined by people from nations as diverse as Philistia and Tyre. The ancient Philistines were the long-standing enemies of Israel, particularly during the time of Saul and David. They had come to the Canaanite coastland from Crete, and ultimately from the Aegean. The Philistines are thus an instance in which "Europeans" enter the biblical record; for the most part they were exceedingly wicked. But here in Psalm 87 some of the Philistines were worshiping Yahweh.

Tyre calls attention to the Phoenicians, the most sophisticated and urbane of the ancient peoples of the land of Canaan. The Phoenicians, who lived in the area of modern Lebanon (or what is left of that land), were a warring, seafaring people. But even from among these calloused people some came to Jerusalem to become part of the worshiping community of Israel's God.

Ethiopia, a portion of eastern Africa, is G11:), which here and in other places in the Old Testament may mean Africa in general.

Psalm 87:4 celebrates the ethnic diversity of the peoples gathered in the Jerusalem temple to worship the Lord. With the Jewish believers were peoples from a variety of places and cultures, a prefiguring of the complex of peoples from the world who now worship the Savior in the church, and ultimately that varied population that will inhabit Jerusalem in the glorious coming kingdom of the Savior.

The wording of verse 4, "to those who know Me," might better be rendered "as those who know Me." Among those who entered the gates of Zion were individuals from Egypt and Babylon, from Philistia, Tyre, and Africa. God looks out on His courts, and with great joy He sees those who have been born in foreign places but who are now found among His people.

More surprising than anything else in this psalm is what God said three times about these people: "This one was born there" (vv. 4-6). This repetition is remarkable, given the psalm's penchant for terseness. Amazingly God imputes to foreign-born believers that they are the same as the native-born peoples of Israel. This strongly repeated idea conveys the dramatic message of this undeservedly obscure psalm, the message of being born again. These people who had come to faith in Yahweh as proselytes had been born in a variety of places, among ethnic peoples, across the known world. But in their coming to faith in the living God, He, Yahweh, declared them born "again." They were "born there," that is, in Zion. Here, then, is one passage in Hebrew

Scripture to which Jesus may have alluded when He expected that Nicodemus knew about being "born again" (John 3:3, 10).

In verse 5 the word for "Most High" (יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ) is used particularly with reference to God's power over the nations (Pss. 47:2; 78:35; 82:6). The words, "shall establish her," point to Zion's great future. What Zion was in the psalmist's day would become the place where an increasing number of peoples would come from the nations to adore the living God. This is prophetic of the coming of Jesus, of the spread of the gospel, and of His coming rule as Savior-King (Isa. 2:1-4). In Psalm 87:6 the psalmist wrote, "The Lord will record, when He registers the peoples." Those who have entered the gates of Zion in saving faith are regarded by Him "as having been born there." All believers of all ages have their true identity in Zion. Wherever a person may have been born, when that person comes to faith in God the Savior, his or her place is Zion, the city God loves.

YAHWEH'S EXULTATION IN ZION IS EXCLUSIVE (V. 7)

The cryptic words, "All my springs are in you" (Ps. 87:7), are not so confusing when read in the light of other Scripture. The poets of the Bible often portrayed salvation pictorially as a spring, a fountain, a source of fresh water in an arid land.

The fountains of God are not to be found in Philistia. They are not in Egypt. None is found in Africa, in Europe, on South Sea Islands, or in America. Only by coming to Zion, that is, to Zion's God, can one be born again. In Zion the Hebrew peoples worshiped the living God in the temple of His presence. In Zion the Lord Jesus fulfilled prophecy and met the demands of the living God in His sacrificial death, burial, and glorious resurrection.

Those who know the Lord join the list of peoples from biblical times to their own--they are Zion-born. And this old poem, elusive as it seems at first to be, is the certain song of redemption.

See, the streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal Love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the Giver,
Never fails from age to age.¹⁴

¹⁴ This is the second stanza of the hymn "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," written by John Newton.

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